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Chapter 9

Poverty Alleviation in a Globalised World: A feminist perspective

by Lena Dominelli, Durham University*.

Introduction

Globalisation is a contentious term, although hegemonic definitions portray it as a global economic system that links all modern nations together (Soros, 2002). While this view highlights its economic impact and the spread of neoliberal ideologies globally, its scope is insufficient. I (Dominelli, 2009) expand it by claiming that globalisation is a process of embedding capitalist social relations in everyday life practices in all countries in the world. It affects every aspect of life by facilitating communication across time and space and cheap travel and impacts upon social institutions including the family, state, services people rely upon, labour market, and physical environment. Its pervasiveness makes globalisation a concept that feminists address to better understand power relations, and one that social workers experience in practice as workers subjected to corporatised business labour processes depicted through the 'new managerialism' including performance management (Clarke and Newman, 1997); the technocratisation of practice (Dominelli, 2004, 2009); and dealing with the withdrawal of state services and reduction of benefits through public expenditure cuts that have intensified poverty among service users, particularly since the recession that began in 2007-8.

Globalisation has intensified the instability of the economic system by treating people and the ecosystem as means to economic ends and growing economic inequalities. Thus, poverty remains a critical internationalised social problem as inequalities increase both between countries and within them. Estimates suggest that 70 per cent of poor people are women. Globalisation's impact has been gendered further (Moghadam, 2005), with women performing the bulk of low-paid work and having to ensure family survival in straightened economic circumstances, thus intensifying the economic burden women have had and continue to carry. Globalisation has also provided opportunities such as the growth of transnationalised families, i.e., those feeling 'at home' in more than one country; and, for social workers; increased connections between peoples and countries that have highlighted interdependencies between them as has occurred around climate change; and given social workers a chance to network, as is exemplified by the Global Agenda whereby the profession's three key international organisations, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), combined their forces to strengthen the voice of the profession internationally.

This chapter critically examines women's situation in relation to poverty, including considering the impact of the MDGs, their gender-neutral approach and failure to engage with the limitations of neoliberal forms of social development, including its incapacity to address structural inequalities. This will assist in better understanding why women and children are the main victim-survivors of such strategies. It will also examine how the

current penchant for austerity measures that dominate social policy discourses internationally, but especially in Western Europe where the welfare state had cushioned many of the structural inequalities that impacted upon women, further reinforce existing inequalities rather than addressing them. They also make women responsible for enhancing family well-being. Thus, women lie at the heart of the development or industrial modernisation strategies that the UN and other international organisations including the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have developed to *alleviate*, not *eliminate*, poverty. Social workers have an important role to play in development discourses and feminist perspectives on these issues can assist practitioners and students to co-work with women in their local communities to enhance their well-being and promote community resilience. I also draw out the implications of this analysis for research and teaching in social work.

Women's Activism

Women's activism has a global pedigree and a centuries old tradition and includes scholarship like Wollsenkraft's classic text () and direct action. Our narratives around women's rights have ebbed and flowed with successes and failures, covering issues that have prioritised women's struggles for equality in all corners of the earth at both the interpersonal level within families, and through social movements which have varied in character. Given the limited space, I explore recent developments, primarily in the West, where a turning point for first wave feminists was securing political representational rights, or the vote for women, e.g., in New Zealand in 1893 (Fraser, 1984; Daley and Nolan, 1994). The major gain of second wave feminists were linked to the right to work in the public sphere on the same basis as men and to secure incomes for themselves and their children, e.g., Mother's Pensions in Canada (Guest, 2003), Family Allowances/Child Benefits in Western Europe; and reproductive rights through Roe v Wade in the USA. Contemporary feminists have also prioritised addressing issues of domestic abuse and violence, whether physical and sexual, a healthy old age, and the elimination of poverty and illiteracy among women. My main focus in this paper will be that of considering feminist social action around women and poverty and exploring feminist priorities about women and poverty in the future.

Inequalities between men and women abound on the global stage, but it has not been through want of women trying to redress this imbalance for themselves. But men, and the governments that they lead, have been reluctant to pursue women's interests wholeheartedly and risk the deprivileging of men who form their bedrock support. Matters have become worse under the recent rise of religious fundamentalism across the major world faiths such Christianity, Islam, Hinduism (Rajavi, 2013) as men seek to reassert patriarchal relations that favoured them. This shift is reflected in increased violence and assaults against women in countries where the majority population share religious affiliations that reinforce patriarchal social relations reaffirming male dominance. These have become concerned with: rolling back feminist gains (modest as they have been) wherever possible; restricting women to the home sphere; re-asserting control over women's reproductive rights and fertility; holding women back educationally and enforcing women's inactivity in the social sphere.

These reactions against women's liberation have also produced further feminist action to defend past gains and encourage wider social change, including the fightback against attacks on their bodily integrity as is exemplified by the actions around the elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM). Alongside such action, women's activism has encouraged other government initiatives, especially at the global level through the UN (United Nations) and its key agencies, including CEDAW (Commission for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). The focus on education and health for women and children in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the promotion of the social protection floor to encourage minimal support for people can be seen in this light. Despite this, women continue to experience higher levels of poverty than men, and their overall life opportunities, especially in low-income countries, have diminished women's health and well-being, especially those aspects linked to pregnancy and giving birth.

Theorising Gendered Structural Inequalities

Poverty is a key structural inequality along with sexism, racism, ageism, classism and other 'isms' which oppress people and legitimate discrimination against specific groups of people. The dynamics of these forms of oppression are based on a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority that divides people into 'us' who are included and categorised as 'superior' and those characterised as 'them' who are excluded and considered inferior and less capable. These processes of inclusion and exclusion result in an 'othering' of those defined as 'inferior' so that relations of dominance or 'power over' can become the basis of the relationships between them. Those labelled 'them', include women in an oppositional binary of male-female. Women's response to such categorisations range from accepting, accommodating or resisting such labelling in and through their interactions with those who are deemed 'superior' (Dominelli, 202a,b). Woman's liberation struggles in whatever country or time period these have been enacted, have resisted such labelling and attempted to redefine social relations in terms of equality between men and women across all social divisions and geographical terrains. Poverty is also important for social workers because the majority of their clients/service users are poor children, women and men. Many of the problems they encounter around helping women, especially mothers, are hindered by the lack of resources to support women who are also carers, and the low priority that governments accord to women's own needs as women. The assumption that caring is women's work that can be taken-for-granted.

The social divisions such as age, gender, ethnicity, class, 'race' (dis)ability on which these structural inequalities are predicated are interactive and compound the impact of disadvantage rather than being separate hierarchies of disadvantage and oppression. Poverty, which I define as the a condition of life in which individuals have limited access to the basic necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, education, health care and social services, all of which are enshrined in Articles 22 to 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), constitutes a human right violation. To this list, I would add ownership of property, and access to communal resources such as land, technological innovations, roads, transportation structures, communication systems, energy supplies,

clean water and sanitation facilities, financial resources, credit and information networks, because these are also sources of power denied to poor people, especially women. Also, for women, poverty is also about the lack of autonomy and the right to make decisions about one's own life, livelihood and body. Social workers can support women in asserting their authority and autonomy.

The Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed in 2000 and provided 8 targets that governments were to meet by 2015. Alleviating poverty by halving it by 2015 was one of these. Another, MDG 3, on education and gender equality contained 7 strategic priorities and 12 indicators for gender equality and women's empowerment (UNDP, 2003, 2005). Although the General Assembly at the United Nations adopted these priorities in 2005, it failed to set benchmarks for assessing progress, consequently measurements of success do not appear in UN Reports on the MDGS. Below, I list these along with progress, as assessed by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW, 2008):

1. Strengthen Opportunities for Post-Primary Education for Girls

Indicator 1: Ratio of female to male gross enrolment rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education

Indicator 2: Ratio of female to male completion rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education

ICRW (2008) claims there is reasonably good practice on this priority.

2. Guarantee Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Indicator 3: Adolescent fertility rate

Indicator 4: Proportion of contraceptive demand satisfied

Progress on this is slow, but unsurprising given that men's desire to control women's bodies has not been tackled as a priority in its own right (ICRW, 2008).

3. Invest in Infrastructure to Reduce Women's and Girls' Time Burdens

Indicator 5: Hours per day (or year) women and men spend fetching water and collecting fuel

There was not enough data for ICRW (2008) to assess progress on this priority, but women are time-poor and rarely get leisure time in their own right. Gathering fuel and fetching clean water are time consuming tasks undertaken primarily by women.

4. Guarantee Women's Property and Inheritance Rights

Indicator 6: Land ownership by sex (male, female or jointly held)

Indicator 7: Housing title by sex (male, female or jointly held)

This contentious issue was another one where ICRW lacked data for assessing progress. Again, women across the world are usually excluded from property ownership by tradition, lack of funds or both.

5. Reduce Gender Inequality in Employment

Indicator 8: Gender differences in the structure of employment

Indicator 9: Gender gaps in earnings in wage employment and self-employment

Slow progress was achieved on this issue (ICRW, 2008), although women have always contributed to household incomes, if only through the unpaid work they undertake.

Nonetheless, the 'glass ceiling' remains in many industrial and financial sectors, even where women have made gains.

6. Increase Women's Representation in Political Bodies

Indicator 10: Percentage of seats held by women in national parliament

Indicator 11: Percentage of seats held by women in local government bodies

ICRW (2008) saw some progress in this arena. In some countries, e.g., Costa Rica, women hold 73 percent of local government seats; Rwanda, 50 percent of parliamentarians are women; Mozambique, women form 35 percent of national representatives, and this is substantially higher than in many Western countries, including the UK (ICRW, 2008: 17).

7. Combat Violence against Women

Indicator 12: Prevalence of domestic violence

Despite the global attention given to this issue, ICRW (2008: 31) had insufficient data to assess progress on this issue. Yet incidence levels for intimate partner violence are high, e.g., 60 per cent in Peru and Uganda; 70 per cent in Ethiopia. In Western countries, Finland and New Zealand had the highest levels at 30 per cent.

Poverty: A Global Issue for Feminists

Poverty affects more women than men, and its increase among women has been termed the 'feminisation of poverty'. The United Nations (UN) has defined absolute poverty as living on less than \$US1-25 per day, a figure recently updated from the 1980 one of \$US1 per day. There are 1.4 billion people living on less than \$1-25 per day. Around 3 billion people live on less than \$US2 per day. Both sums are inadequate and a blot on humanity because how can anyone in the 21st century be expected to develop to their full potential, utilising their skills, talents and strengths on so little? Yet, there are heroic examples of women who manage to do so in the most appalling conditions of scarcity and restricted freedoms. Even in the West, poverty levels are higher among women, especially those who are lone parents or older women. Poverty is not just about inadequate incomes, but also about the right to have fulfilled lives within one's community, to share in a common sense of identity and belonging with other people, the right to control one's life oneself albeit within a range of mutually agreed obligations to care for each other. And, however large or small that group is, this includes the right to enjoy the rights of citizenship and entitlements that go with it, not the one-sided demand of carrying the burden of providing the goods and services that enable wealthy people to enjoy all the fruits of life, or provide essential but unvalued care to those one is responsible for, as women do within the family.

Wealth exists alongside poverty, and in the 21st century, there is the continual growth of an unaccountable super-rich, multinational elite that runs global corporations that produce massive profits for the few at the expense of the many. While millions of people across Europe and the United States were facing hardship in and bankruptcy of their nations, loss of their homes, welfare services and jobs during neoliberalism's fiscal crisis that began in 2007, the super-rich elite steadily grew in size and wealth.

The group of super-rich has risen from 946 individuals, mainly men, in 2007 when the fiscal crisis began, to 1011 by 2011. In 2013, there were 1645 billionaires holding \$6.4 trillion in 69 countries. This represented an increase of 18.5 percent over 2012. Of these billionaires, only 172 were women. Bill Gates, worth \$US76 billion, resumed the role of richest man in the world after 4 years as second to Mexico's Carlos Slim Helu with \$US72 billion. Amancio Ortega of Spain holds the third spot with his \$US64 billion. Warren Buffet is now in fourth place with \$US58.2 billion. To put it more graphically, in 2007, the world's richest 3 people had between them more than the total gross domestic product of the poorest 48 countries. And, within the US in 2005, Bill Gates had more money than 40 per cent of his fellow citizens combined. Frenchwoman Liliane Bettencourt, the owner of L'Oreal, is the world's richest woman. But her \$US34.5 billion is less than half of what Bill Gates, the richest man has. Gender relations that disadvantage women are evident among the super-rich elite too.

The list has grown substantially since 1987 when the *Forbes Billionaires List* was initially compiled with 140 billionaires spread across 24 countries. Of today's billionaires, only 23 have been on the list since its inception. Americans (492 of them) are the most numerous national grouping, but billionaires are now found throughout the world. Mainland China with 152 billionaires, Russia with 111 billionaires and India with 56 billionaires, are catching up quickly. Countries like the UK have 47 billionaires and Hong Kong, China has 45 billionaires (Kroll and Dolan, 2014). Women are a small minority within all these countries. How can the intensification of poverty at one end produce such excessive levels of wealth at the other? This question deserves an answer from governments that have allowed this to happen and the super-rich elite that has benefited from this global polarisation of wealth and income between and within countries.

A crucial reason for such disparities in income between men and women is the division of social relations into the public and private sphere and the allocation of women's roles primarily within the private sphere of the home and caring. Women's lives have traditionally been structured around their responsibilities for caring for children, their husbands and dependent relatives, especially older parents and disabled persons. These activities have formed the basis of women's dominance in the private realm of the home and their exclusion from the public sphere. Whilst this has been the hegemonic ideology of patriarchal ways of thinking, being and doing in the world, women's history has ample examples of resistance to these restrictions from ancient to contemporary times. Women who sought to secure changes that improved women's lives have been called 'feminists'. Sometimes they have been pilloried or ridiculed for their aspirations. There are a number of schools of thought within this overall category – radical feminists, lesbians, socialist

feminist, Marxist feminists, liberation theology feminists, black feminists, and Third World feminists, among others (Banks, 1981; Jayawardna, 1986; Hill Collins, 1991).

The feminisation of poverty is extensively explored in feminist literature, but the role of poverty alleviation strategies for women is rarely discussed on the world stage. Most discourses on poverty alleviation are optimistic, and highlight the potential of research on the topic to improve women's lives. However, policies on poverty alleviation, not its elimination, have failed to reduce the increasing numbers of women drawn into poverty, even though they may have several low paid jobs that draw them into the ranks of the working poor as in America, especially if lone mothers; or carry out unpaid work in the home with little economic security as recompense for their labours (Ehrenreich, 2001). Moreover, policymakers seem oblivious to the impact of the feminisation of poverty to increase considerably the burden that women already carry for family well-being, especially that of children and older people (Chant, 2006). Women's engagement in paid work is additional to these responsibilities.

Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Platform for Action covered action on the gendered effects of poverty, and adopted four strategic objectives:

1. Review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and endeavours of poor women.
2. Revise laws and administrative practices to ensure women's equal rights and access to economic resources.
3. Provide women with access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions.
4. Develop gender-based methodologies and conduct research to address the feminization of poverty.

Progress on these objectives has been limited and poverty among women has both deepened and spread, although specific figures are hard to come by, the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) estimates that 70 percent of those living in absolute poverty are women. The Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) (2005) evaluating the targets of the Beijing Platform for Action claims these have not been met, despite the passage of time and governments' commitment to their realisation on several occasions (UNRISD, 2005; UNSD, 2005; UNMP/TFEGE, 2005).

Addressing men's violence against women and children in the home and on the streets is crucial to enabling women to transcend poverty by engaging in the public sphere where waged work and political participation are located. A major breakthrough in this arena occurred when Erin Pizzey opened the Women's Shelter in Chiswick, London, England, to provide safe spaces for women to become themselves. Feminist and social work conferences on the topic and its inclusion on the Beijing Platform of Action following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995 (UNIFEM, 2002), and countless examples of lobbying for women's and children's rights to lives free from violence and zero tolerance, highlight women and children as the largest casualties of violence perpetrated across gender divides. Coercing women and keeping them dependent on men for their livelihoods is evident in situations of armed conflict where

women's bodies become symbols of nationhood as men fight each other, pillaging and raping women and children in total disregard of their rights. Sexual violence reflects men's violation of the rights of women and children to bodily integrity, and although women do occasionally commit physical and sexual violence against men and children, their numbers are small (Strauss, 2008). Sometimes women attack men because they have been subjected to years of hardship, physical and sexual violence within the home, and they, not their systematic abuse, become the headline (Hope, 2010). Dominelli (1989) described the potential for adults including women to abuse their power over children because children are dependent upon them for their survival, physically and economically, depending on age. She coined the term 'adultism' to describe this particular abuse of power and includes adults keeping children in financial dependency.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a form of violence perpetrated against girl children usually through the hands of adult women for the benefit of adult men who can be assured of a woman's virginity and constraints to her sexual expression and enjoyment. UNICEF (2014a) suggests that 30 million girls and women have undergone this form of assault on their bodies. It can cause psychological harm, illness and death. There are campaigns in diverse countries seeking to eradicate such practices which affect poor women more than wealthy women.

Child marriages can be considered a form of assault against children. Early marriage is particularly important to poor families seeking to reduce demands on family income. Most child marriages comprise of young girls being forced to 'marry' older men many years older than them. These have involved around 700 million women globally, of which 250 million were married before the age of 15 (UNICEF, 2014b). This figure is predicted to rise as the planet's population increases, unless this practice is stopped. Child brides can have their health endangered by having children when too young; being infected with sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS; and experiencing high levels of social isolation because they become cut off from family and friends at a young age. And, they face barriers in completing their education and acquiring the skills to earn their own living and rise out of poverty.

The rise of religious fundamentalism across the major world religions has to be linked to men's desire to re-establish patriarchal relations where they lost them, and to enforce them where they have not. Keeping women dependent and incapable of earning wages outside the home is one way of asserting such control. In the USA, Gilder (1983) talked about the state's collusion in undermining men by giving women freedom through the provision of an income independent of men, and claiming that the state had 'cuckolded' men. Walby (1990) described the state's role in providing such financing including through the provision benefits and employment opportunities for women in the welfare state as public patriarchy replacing private patriarchy. Now, with austerity measures in major industrial countries, particularly in Europe, whittling away at benefit levels, entitlement to benefits and employment opportunities, there is another shift again towards private patriarchy. Because this is linked to the commodification of welfare and the privatisation of public goods representing collective institutionalised solidarity through the welfare state, I call this new form of private patriarchy '*corporetarchy*', because it

involves global corporations reinforcing patriarchal relations whereby women are paid less to provide the same services as they had through the welfare state. Additionally, most of the decisions made by these multinationals are made by men. Thus, for example, women welfare assistants who work in Serco establishments in the UK earn less than they did when employed by a local authority to do the same work, and receive less benefits than they did previously.

The Social Protection Floor

The social protection floor was recently devised internationally under the auspices of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to provide a safety net for the world's poorest people. Women, as the bulk of this group were expected to be the main beneficiaries. The social protection floor sets minimum guarantees determined nationally for minimum income security and health care across the life cycle. It aims to create a platform of security below which no individual or family should fall (ILO, 2011). Caution needs to be exercised in seeing this as an effective poverty alleviation strategy because benefit levels can be set very low. Thus, it could entail the same trap that befell Western welfare states, namely that benefit levels cannot undermine low wages to compel people to accept low paid work. This became the price for support exacted by those who control the global market and governments that ply the neoliberal line which argues for a minimal role for the state in ensuring the well-being of its populations. While earning less, the costs of goods and services have increased, so women find they must do more with less in meeting family needs by spending more time looking for bargains or making things from scratch (George, 2003).

Additionally, the majority of the policymakers lining up behind the 'social protection floor' are men. And while there is no justification for reifying men or seeing them as a monolithic group, the question of where the voices of women in these deliberations are has to be raised. Feminists in the second wave had asked for guaranteed incomes, equal pay for equal work, free high quality childcare, but none of these demands have been fully met, and feminism has entered its fourth phase. Even in one of the most egalitarian countries in the world in gender terms, Sweden, there is a wages gap between men's and women's earnings. It is simply smaller than elsewhere, and child care, while of excellent quality, requires some form of parental input (Leitner, 2003).

Social Development Strategies: The Overburdening of Poor Women?

Social development, primarily in the form of modernisation and industrialisation, with its associated income generation projects has been seen as a vehicle through which poverty alleviation strategies can reduce the number of people who are poor globally. The achievement of this goal, even under the MDGs, seems unlikely, so how can poverty be alleviated and women experience economic empowerment and who will create new initiatives for women? A problem with existing provisions is that many rely on women assuming traditional activities and doing them better and more effectively, often by receiving meagre sums of money, for example, to sew clothes for sale by acquiring a loan for a sewing machine through a microcredit scheme like the Grameen Bank. The

Grameen Bank's Annual Report for 2013 reveals that it has helped countless women improve their livelihoods, and this is to be applauded. Mohamed Yunis was awarded a Nobel Prize for this initiative in 2006 and has become a millionaire. However, few of the women who have received loans through the Grameen Banks have reached this income level, and they pay high rates of interests – around 22 per cent, which are substantial for poor women. Additionally, women become collectively responsible for repaying loans when a woman in their group cannot pay. This hardly seems an equitable deal, and women might do better by forming a more traditional credit union.

The UN 2014 World Development Report indicates that 2.2 billion people continue to be poor or near poor, with about 70 percent being women. Regardless of the progress achieved through the MDGs, microcredit schemes, or industrialisation strategies, progress in alleviating poverty has been slow. Consequently, any gains made on poverty alleviation cannot be considered sustainable. This highlights the importance of the development of a global holistic poverty eradication project that interrogates the dominance of global corporations in determining and running the world's business, often to the detriment of women. Social workers can engage in public awareness and community mobilisations to raise these issues, discuss them and develop locally sustainable solutions that link caring for people with caring for the environment (Dominelli, 2012). Women – residents and social workers - could be at the centre of such initiatives.

Social Work Roles in Poverty Reduction Strategies

Social workers can act as advocates for the elimination of poverty at all levels from the local to the global. One of the pillars of the Global Agenda is eliminating socio-economic inequalities. They can assist women in mobilising and empowering themselves to work from their existing strengths to innovate and develop creative solutions to their problems that are rooted in sustainable conditions and enable women to help each other achieve together what they cannot achieve alone. Social workers can also facilitate the processes of women accessing the information and external resources they need to follow their dreams for a better life for themselves and their children. They can also assist women in obtaining the education and health care services to which they are already entitled to through the UDHR which all member states of the UN have signed.

None of this work will be easy, nor will it be without risk for both the social workers and the women involved. If their endeavours are unsuccessful, they will confirm stereotypes about women's incapacity to do things. If successful, they may antagonise traditionalists who do not wish to empower women. This was a lesson forced upon Malala Yousafzai, a young girl whom the Taliban tried to kill on a school bus in 2012 for wanting to go to school in the Swat Valley in Pakistan (Husain, 2013).

Taking Poverty Seriously in Social Work Research and Training

Preparing social workers for a new role in poverty eradication and sustainable development strategies will require the classroom curriculum to include materials on

social policy and sustainable development, poverty and economics, community development, politics, power relations, and anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002a, b; 2012). Practice placements will also have to be community-based and involved in supporting sustainable development that includes analyses of the gendered realities and oppression women face. Security considerations for social workers and women residents should also be included.

Conclusions

Poverty and the oppression of women are socially constructed phenomena which can be eradicated. It needs courage and wisdom, a commitment to equality, political will and energy and resources to mobilise to do so. Social workers can help men and women to unite to achieve this task. Men can also benefit by liberating themselves from their patriarchal chains.

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